

African American Students and U.S. High Schools

By 2050, the United States Census Bureau projects that about 50 percent of the U.S. population will be African American, Hispanic, or Asian.¹ Given these steep demographic shifts, the performance of students of color and the characteristics of the schools they attend are important factors that must concern all Americans.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, African American students made up 16 percent of the public school population in 2004.² These students, disproportionately concentrated in high-poverty, low-performing schools, are vulnerable to poor educational outcomes that undermine their chances for success in life.

The nation's public high schools, in particular, are failing too many African American youth.

Graduation, Dropouts, and Preparedness

African American high school students are notably falling behind their white counterparts in graduation rates, dropout rates, literacy rates, and college preparedness rates.

- In 2005, only 55 percent of all black students graduated from high school on time with a regular diploma, compared to 78 percent of whites.³
- In 2005, the on-time graduation rate for black males was 48 percent nationally; for white males it was 74 percent.⁴
- Nearly half of the nation's African American students, but only 11 percent of white students, attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm.⁵
- In 2002, 23 percent of all black students who started public high school left it prepared for college, compared to 40 percent of whites.⁶
- On average, African American and Hispanic twelfth-grade students read at approximately the same level as white eighth graders.⁷
- About half of poor, urban ninth graders read at only a fifth- or sixth-grade level.⁸
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that 88 percent of African American eighth graders read below grade level, compared to 62 percent of white eighth graders.⁹
- The twelfth-grade reading scores of African American males were significantly lower than those for men and women across every other racial and ethnic group.¹⁰

Schools, Segregation, and Teacher Quality

A disproportionate number of failing schools, across grade levels, are predominantly comprised of poor, racial, and ethnic minority students. These segregated schools tend to have fewer financial, human, and material resources than schools in more affluent areas. By the time students who attend these schools reach high school, the academic challenges they face have been compounded by years of substandard education.

- More than 60 percent of black students attend schools where more than 50 percent of the school population is identified as living in poverty, compared to 18 percent of white students.¹¹
- U.S. schools are now 41 percent nonwhite and the majority of the nonwhite students attend schools that show substantial segregation.¹²
- A high-poverty, majority-minority high school is five times more likely to have weak promoting power (promoting 50 percent or fewer freshmen to senior status within four years) than a majority white school.¹³
- In the forty-nine states studied, the school districts with the highest minority enrollments receive an average of \$877 less per student than school districts with the lowest number of minorities enrolled.¹⁴
- In high schools where at least 75 percent of the students are low-income, there are three times as many uncertified or out-of-field teachers teaching both English and science than in schools with wealthier populations.¹⁵
- Black students were more likely than white students to attend schools where trash was present on the floor (29 percent vs. 18 percent), graffiti was present (10 percent vs. 3 percent), and ceilings were in disrepair (12 percent vs. 7 percent).¹⁶

Special, Gifted, and College Preparatory Education

Research shows that African American students experience disparities in other important areas of education:

- In 2004, 13 percent of African American students aged six to twenty-one received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, compared to 9 percent of the total student population.¹⁷
- In 1999, 35 percent of African American students in grades seven through twelve had been suspended or expelled during their school years, compared to 13 percent of Asians and 15 percent of whites.¹⁸
- Of students who graduated with the Class of 2007, African Americans scored lower than all other racial and ethnic groups on all three parts of the SAT.¹⁹
- The number of black students taking Advanced Placement (AP) exams increased between 1984 and 2000; however, the percentage of African American twelfth graders who took the exam in 2000 was lower than that of whites or Hispanics.²⁰



Endnotes

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- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ R. Balfanz and N. Legters, *Locating the Dropout Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2004).
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- ¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “NAEP Data Explorer,” <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde/> (accessed September 22, 2008).
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- ¹³ Balfanz and Legters, *Locating the Dropout Crisis*.
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- ¹⁷ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Minorities* (NCES 2007-039) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).
- ¹⁸ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks* (NCES 2003-034) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office], 2003).
- ¹⁹ College Board, *2007 College-Bound Seniors* (New York: Author, 2007).
- ²⁰ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks*.

